

## **Chapter One**

**She was lost in the brightness, a magnificent static whiteness, alluring and warm. It was an easy place to be, if it was a place. Perhaps it was a state, a bright and new awareness, a safe and final destination.**

**She only knew that her essence was etched in the great luminous energy and she did not wish to leave it. The light seemed to be transporting her outward, expanding some awesome truth, recently possessed, and she wanted only to remain and to become whatever the promising ecstasy.**

**Then, there came a shimmer of interference, vaguely emanating from the mystic fringes, slowly fragmenting the weightless pool of white. There was a rippling which nudged her new awareness, gently precluding her anticipated oneness with the expanding light.**

**Then came sound, soft and beckoning, like a bird chirping in slow motion, becoming stronger and more strident. She resisted the sound and the fragmentation, but she could not pull herself onward into the radiant void. Like a swimmer urgently breast stroking against a strong noiseless tide, she felt herself dipping, sinking, then free-falling from the disintegrating brilliance.**

**She became conscious of her head shaking in sidelong negation of the interference, her lips silently murmuring, 'no, no, let me stay! Please let me stay!'**

**Then she acknowledged the inevitable full immersion back to a solid, contoured reality. The bird chirps became loud concerned voices. The ripples became caring and caressing hands.**

**Billy Ray Chitwood PHOENIX FIRE**

**The hard ground was cold. She began to shiver, felt the urge to rise, but was somehow constricted. Her mind made some adjustments and she suddenly knew where she was, how she had gotten there.**

**Finally, she slowly opened her eyes with a fluttery acceptance of her immediate environment. A man's face came into focus, hovering two feet above her own. She felt pinned down and quickly discovered that the man was astride her. There was a momentary sense of panic but something about the man's face made her relax.**

**A light rain fell, and she was conscious of wet hair matted to her face and forehead. The sky was a dull gray, and skinny treetops came to her peripherally as some surreal apparitions. The man's concerned face gave her a final focus. She remembered what had happened.**

**The lightning! She recalled an awful clap of thunder, so jarring and harsh, so totally upon her, instantaneously enveloping her in its loud and splintered brightness. She remembered the searing, exquisite pain that had so consummately wracked her body and mind.**

**She had been jogging and she must have been struck by lightning. As she blinked from the raindrops and the accounting of the lightning strike, she felt lethargic and without purpose. She had been struck by lightning, yet there was no panic, no real sense of urgency.**

**The man's hands left her chest and he studied her with a tender and squinted concern. She felt the weight of his body leaving her, felt a great rush of air fill her chest. The man lifted himself, but his soft blue eyes remained upon her face.**

**Billy Ray Chitwood PHOENIX FIRE**

**They were beautiful eyes, shrouded by dark cavernous brows. Wisps of his black hair was pasted about his forehead, and he made odd movements with his lips as though making an adjustment.**

**Her own lips felt strangely tender to the touch of her tongue, and, in a moment of clarity, she understood: the man had given her mouth to mouth resuscitation.**

**The man then spoke, softly, his voice conveying a cultured refinement and pleasant resonance. "Can you move your arms and legs?"**

**She understood the question and lifted her head tentatively, feeling her hands, arms, and legs slowly move to her inner commands. She nodded to the handsome stranger who knelt above and to her side. She managed a small, sad smile of gratitude.**

**"And can you speak?" He returned her smile.**

**"Yes, I think so," came her weak reply.**

**She noticed for the first time a small group of people standing off to her right, near a park utility shed. She heard a siren off in the distance, its sound increasing in volume. She attempted to rise from the ground.**

**"Maybe you should stay where you are until you've been medically checked. Are you feeling much pain?" The man lightly touched her shoulder.**

**As her powers of observation became more keen, she noticed how the man was dressed. He wore faded red denim shorts, a powder blue sweatshirt which matched his eyes, white athletic socks, and Adidas jogging shoes. Her own ensemble of white shorts, blue top, white socks, and Nike shoes merged nicely with the man's attire.**

**She answered the question. “No, I don’t think so, not pain so much. It’s sort of dull aching almost everywhere about my body. I think I’m okay. You are very kind to help me. Thank you.”**

**“No ‘thanks’ necessary. It was kind of freaky the way that cloud exploded above us. You just got unlucky, and I suppose we could be faulted for jogging when a storm was brewing ...”**

**The man stopped talking as he saw the flashing lights and heard the diminishing siren whirr of an approaching ambulance.**

**Uniformed EMTs rushed from the ambulance to the woman’s side, their faces intent and focused. She watched as they quickly set up equipment and prepared for various medical checks. She was beginning to feel confident that her body had not sustained any permanent damage, although some tingling sensations remained in her legs.**

**After all the medical tests were run, she heard an attendant announce that her vital signs were normal, that she was stable.**

**The visage of the handsome stranger stayed with her, after the ambulance attendants had displaced him. The image of his dark hair wet against the brow stayed with her, even when he became a blur on the gray fringe of the rainy-day crowd. His face stayed with her even beyond the hospital’s emergency room where she was pronounced hale, hearty, and lucky to be alive. His soft smile stayed even when she had returned to her spacious Scottsdale condominium.**